

THE METAMORPHOSIS  
OF A HASIDIC LEGEND  
IN AGNON'S  
“‘AL 'EVEN 'AḤAT”

by

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The use of tales and fragments of tales concerning the Baal Shem Tov is not infrequent in the works of Shmuel Yosef Agnon; in fact, an entire collection of such stories is included in his volume, *Ha-'esh ve-ha-'ešim*.<sup>1</sup> The story which will concern us in this study, however, is “‘Al 'even 'aḥat”<sup>2</sup> (“On One Rock”) which first appeared in 1934. The story is of interest because it relates to a legend from *Shivḥei ha-Besht* (*The Praises of the Besht*),<sup>3</sup> the very first collection of tales about the Baal Shem Tov to be published, even

1. “Sippurim na'im shel Rabbi Yisra'el Besht,” *Kol sippurav shel Shemu'el Yosef 'Agnon*, vol. 8, *Ha-'esh ve-ha-'ešim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1962), pp. 91–107. The collection appeared previously in *Molad* 18 (1960): 357–64.

2. *Kol sippurav*, vol. 2, 'Elu ve-'elu, pp. 302–4. First appeared in *Ha-hed* 9 (1933–34), no. 10, p. 23.

3. *Sefer Shivḥei ha-Besht*, ed. Sh. A. Horodetsky (Tel Aviv, 1947). The work which first appeared in 1815 has been translated and edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov: The Earliest Collections of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism* (Bloomington, 1970).

though the figure of the Besht himself does not appear in the story by Agnon.

*Shivhei ha-Besht* mentions Rabbi Adam as the person who had found manuscripts in a cave and who designated, on the basis of a dream-question, that these writings be given over to Israel ben Eliezer from Okopy. Upon the death of Rabbi Adam, his son faithfully moved to the town of Okopy in order to find the person designated and worthy of acquiring these mystic writings. In this way the manuscripts came to the hands of the Baal Shem Tov who later sealed those writings in a stone which then closed, and he placed a watchman to guard the site of the hidden writings.<sup>4</sup>

In “‘Al ’even ’aḥat,” Agnon did not retell this tradition concerning Rabbi Adam and the documents hidden in a stone; rather, he composed a story which relates to that tradition in a way which very subtly invites comparison with the hasidic source itself. “‘Al ’even ’aḥat” is a story told in the first person by one who was writing about Rabbi Adam and who envisions the secret writings in their entirety. Those writings, however, are forever hidden in order that they will not reach a person unworthy of receiving them, as such a person might then bring the entire world to a state of chaos. According to Agnon’s story, it is not the Baal Shem Tov but rather Rabbi Adam himself who placed the writings in a closed stone to be permanently hidden from mankind. The absence of a Besht-figure from the story tends to suggest that there is no one worthy of receiving these teachings, and in this sense Agnon has given his reworking of the hasidic legend a pessimistic ambience.

As the thematics of the story emerge from the inner parallels, relationships and antitheses within his story, it becomes clear that Agnon has molded his source in a way which suggests a very different kind of theme from that found in *Shivhei ha-Besht*. The writer at work on his project concerning Rabbi Adam is described as *sagur u-mesuggar* (closed) (p. 302) emphasizing the quality he shares with the stone which contains the documents. He is also *parush min ha-’olam* (separated or withdrawn from the world) (p. 303) and in seeking to pursue his writing and research on Rabbi Adam without danger of disturbances, he leaves the town for the woods where he is able to devote himself completely to his writing. In envisioning the hidden documents down to the last letter, he is still able only to look at the writings but not actually read them since they do not belong to the root of his soul (p. 303). The sense of distance and detachment of the writer-

4. Horodetsky, pp. 42, 51.

figure from the secret writings is expressed also by way of analogy, "and my eyes encompass them as metal which encompasses precious stones while the precious stones do not mix with it" (p. 303). The narrator then goes on to outline both his limitations and his attainments: "But if I have not had the merit of reading them, I have had the merit of telling of their contents. If we have come to the world to place in order that which previous generations have left for us, I am able to say that in several respects I have been successful in giving orders to things" (p. 303). The narrator has defined the task of the historical scholar and the *Wissenschaft* which he embodies at this point of the story along with a sense of the limitations of historical scholarship which grow out of the scholar's detached relationship to his subject.

There is a certain similarity between this story and those of *Sefer ha-ma'asim*<sup>5</sup> which Agnon began to write in the early 1930s: both utilize the first-person narrator-figure together with a task or quest, the fulfillment of which is foiled by interruptions and indecision. The narrator, who should have been able to complete his writings, is disturbed in his endeavor when he saw an old man lost in the forest and took it upon himself to lead the man back to town. In doing so, the narrator broke out from his state of being closed and withdrawn from the world, but he also forsook his writing project and actually left his papers and writing instruments lying upon the rock, easy prey to wind and beast alike.

The momentary abandon of his task in itself did not prove harmful for he later returned to the forest to find his work lying on the stone, quite miraculously, just as he had left it. The familiar pattern of the interruption which prevents the execution of a task or quest, so familiar from *Sefer ha-ma'asim*, is avoided, but only for the moment. Just as the narrator later senses regret that he left to lead the old man to town while he could have brought his work to completion, the rock opens and closes, forever concealing his manuscript. It seems that the narrator-scholar is not the type worthy of acquiring the knowledge of Rabbi Adam's secret documents.

While the narrator has reiterated all along that it is impossible to locate the stone in which the documents are hidden, the reader grasps that it is in fact the very stone in the forest upon which the narrator was writing, for this stone has now opened to absorb the papers of the narrator and has then closed again.

The moment of apparent failure, however, becomes a turning point in

5. *Kol sippurav*, vol. 6, *Samukh ve-nir'eh*.

the story and brings it to a positive end; the narrator acquires insight which overshadows the permanent loss of the knowledge he had sought concerning the documents of Rabbi Adam. Having no more reason to remain in the woods, he returns to the town, a move which suggests a return from withdrawal to concern. With the darkness of evening, every stone along the way appears illumined and, moreover, discloses itself to him: "And every single rock which came up before me on the way would glow, and every ridge and crease and vein in them stood revealed before me. I encompassed the rocks with my eyes as the sand of the earth which encompasses the rock, and in which the rock is firmly fixed" (p. 304).

The new analogy contrasts with the former figure of the metal which serves as a frame for jewels while detached from the jewels themselves; the sand, unlike the metal frame, touches the rock. The detachment of the scholar is abandoned and the metamorphosis of a hasidic legend becomes in this case a metamorphosis of the scholar. Instead of deciphering a secret of the past and a hidden body of mystic teaching, he has found a world full of mystery: "What does it matter to me whether it be that rock which absorbed the writings or these stones" (p. 304).

Upon first reading the story, we noted that the tradition from *Shivhei ha-Besht* is reflected, but with the conspicuous absence of the Baal Shem Tov himself. Now, following the insight acquired by the narrator who abandoned his scholarly pursuit, he himself mirrors something of the Baal Shem Tov. The experience of every stone giving off light suggests the principle of the Besht that *leit 'atar panui minneh* (there is no place empty of Him); the mystery and sense of God's presence pervades all.

The transformation of the narrator-figure has to it still another dimension. The title of the story mirrors a rabbinic comment on the biblical account of the setting of Jacob's dream, a comment which explains the use of the words *'avnei ha-maqom* (rocks of the place) in Genesis 28:11, while later in the same episode the singular word *'even* (rock) appears in Genesis 28:18. Of this apparent inconsistency, rabbinic aggadah created a tradition that while Jacob gathered together twelve rocks from the altar upon which his father Isaac had been bound, the rocks merged to become one rock as a sign that the twelve tribes of Israel which will emerge from Jacob will similarly form one people.<sup>6</sup> While in the rabbinic sources the many rocks join

6. Hullin 91b; Pirquei de-Rabbi 'Eli'ezer 35; Yalqut Shime'oni 1:119.

together to become one rock, in “‘Al ’even ’aḥat” the one, unique rock gives way to a multitude of rocks as each rock along the way now appears to the narrator as something “beloved and pleasant” (p. 304.).

The reversal of direction from that of the aggadic source and the abandon of the quest of the one particular rock in favor of the beauty and disclosure of every rock along the way suggest in turn the differentiation which Aristotle defined between the concerns of the historian and the poet.<sup>7</sup> The narrator, prior to the turning point, is the historian whose concern is in the detail that has happened, the individual event, the singular occurrence. Following his transformation he is the artist whose concern is with the universal which can repeat itself in time and which was, for Aristotle, more philosophical and more significant than history.

In this moment of insight following the frustration of his research, the narrator-figure is transformed from a detached scholar to a Besht-like figure; he is also transformed from an historian to an artist.

7. Aristotle *Poetics* 9.